



## **The UN in Action: Disarming Syria of Chemical Weapons During a Civil War**

**By**

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The topic you have chosen for tonight – disarming Syria’s chemical weapons during a civil war – hits directly on the single most challenging aspect of this situation. No Government or international organization has ever attempted to undertake the verified elimination of an entire category of weapons during an armed conflict.

Before I turn to the challenges we have faced – and the ways in which we have overcome them – some brief background is in order.

As you may be aware, the current United Nations engagement on Syrian chemical weapon issues was born out the tragic use of these weapons during the course of the conflict. My office, the Office for Disarmament Affairs, has been continuously engaged on the Syrian chemical weapons issue ever since we received the first report of alleged use in March of last year. That first report came from the Syrian Government, which alleged that chemical weapons had been used in the Khan al-Asal neighbourhood of Aleppo. Given the gravity of the situation, the Secretary-General immediately decided to launch an investigation. Other Member States immediately followed with reports and corroborating information of the alleged use of chemical at other locations in Syria during the conflict.

The standing mandate for the Secretary-General to conduct investigations of the alleged use of chemical or biological weapons is based upon General Assembly resolution 42/37 C of 1987. The Security Council reaffirmed that mandate and authority in resolution 620 of 1988. Before 1987, the General Assembly and Security Council had authorized several investigations of alleged use on an ad hoc basis, all relating to the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War. After 1987, the General Assembly also approved a set of operational guidelines, which remain the procedural and methodological basis for the conduct of any such investigations.

Internally, we refer to this mandate as the Secretary-General’s mechanism. This mechanism is the primary tool of the United Nations to uphold the international prohibition against the use of chemical or biological weapons in armed conflict. It obliges the Secretary-General to investigate any credible allegation raised by any Member State. Under the mechanism, the purpose of an investigation is to ascertain the nature and extent of any use and to report those findings to all Member States.

As you may be aware, while the investigation mission was on the ground in Damascus, the world received the news of the massive attack in Ghouta suburb in which chemical weapons were used. The Secretary-General dispatched me immediately to Syria to negotiate the redirection of the mission to investigate this allegation.

The Mission handed over its preliminary report – covering the Ghouta incident – on 16 September. Its findings confirmed our worst fears: chemical weapons had been used on a relatively large scale in the Ghouta area of Damascus in the context of the on-going conflict in Syria. This heinous attack resulted in numerous casualties, particularly amongst civilians.

When he reported to the Security Council, the Secretary-General expressed the view that this use of chemical weapons constituted a grave violation of the 1925 Protocol and other rules of customary international law and was a war crime.

New hope, however, emerged from the report of this tragedy. Without a doubt, the indisputable conclusions of the investigation of the Ghouta incident functioned as a major catalyst for both peace and disarmament. Two days prior to the issuance of the report, the Syrian Government announced its intention to join the Chemical Weapons Convention. That same day, the Russian Federation and the United States reached agreement on a framework to eliminate the Syria's chemical weapons programme. The announcement of the Geneva-II conference aimed at ending the conflict came shortly thereafter.

The ability of the United Nations to carry out its mandate in Syria was enormously important in highlighting the role of international institutions in solving seemingly intractable real-world problems.

It vindicated the indispensable role of international organizations in undertaking work that no national government alone can accomplish.

It demonstrated capability of the United Nations to undertake complex missions under the most difficult circumstances, including in situations of civil war.

It united the primary international actors who had sought for so long to find a way to bring the warring parties together and to end the conflict.

For many of these reasons, the United Nations was the natural partner to work with the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons as the operational enabler for the disarmament effort.

The elimination of Syria's chemical weapons programme is a complicated undertaking, requiring the resources of both the OPCW and the United Nations as well as active support and contribution by Member States and other bodies such as the World Health Organization.

The OPCW Executive Council and UN Security Council, in resolution 2118, required Syria to eliminate its chemical weapons programme by the end of June this year. In comparison with other countries that have disarmed their chemical weapons, this speed is unprecedented. The only reasonable way to accommodate this goal is to remove all chemical weapons from the country for destruction by third-party countries.

In accordance with the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Executive Council has also established a number of critical intermediate deadlines. Those deadlines roughly correspond to the three phases of the disarmament Mission:

The first phase included initial inspections to verify the preliminary declarations submitted by Syria of its chemical weapons, related munitions, as well as its storage and production facilities. During this phase, we activated the Joint OPCW-UN Mission and established an initial operating capacity in Damascus as well as a staging area in Cyprus.

During the second phase, which lasted through early November 2013, Syria was required to complete the destruction of all chemical weapon production and mixing/filling equipment. It was also required to submit its full declaration of chemical weapons and production facilities, as required under the CWC – Syria declared a total of 1000 tonnes of chemicals, including mustard

agent, precursors for Sarin and other chemical weapons components. During this phase, the OPCW was required to complete its initial inspection of all Syrian chemical weapons facilities.

The third and most complicated phase required the removal of all chemical weapons, agents and precursors from Syria by 31 December 2013 and their final elimination by 30 June 2014. Syria is also required to destroy its chemical weapons production facilities in four stages, beginning in mid-December 2013. All unfilled chemical weapon munitions were to be destroyed by 31 January 2014.

As a segue to my reflection on the specific challenges of eliminating a chemical weapons programme amidst a civil war, I'd like to say a few words on where we stand.

Syria completed initial actions before the established deadlines. This included its full declaration to the OPCW, as well as the destruction of all mixing/filling equipment and unfilled chemical weapon munitions.

The OPCW was able to complete initial inspections at 21 of 23 declared sites in advanced of its mandated deadline. Subsequently it was able to remotely inspect one additional site through the use of sealed cameras operated by Syria. It has remained unable to access one site due to the local security situation.

Concerns over the security situation have impacted the destruction Mission as well. To help mitigate these concerns, the Joint Mission and a number of States have provided Syria with material and equipment necessary for it to undertake its obligations. Despite this assistance, Syria was unable to complete the transport of its chemical weapons to the port of Latakia by the 31 December deadline. It has, however, been able to ship initial consignments of these materials, which have been removed by sea on ships provided by Denmark and Norway. These materials will be neutralized on-board a US ship with the residual toxic chemicals to be disposed of in commercial facilities.

## **Challenges**

Many of the challenges we have faced in carrying out the alleged use investigation in Syria presaged many of the challenges now faced by the disarmament mission. Others have been unique to the scope and ambition of the disarmament effort. It goes without saying that a general theme embedded in most challenges is the security situation, which impacts nearly every dimension of the mission.

### *Bringing technical experts into a war zone*

In terms of this specific issue, one challenge common to both investigation and disarmament mission relates to the need of bringing technical and medical experts, from OPCW, the World Health Organization and other entities into a war zone. Here, the United Nations, with its extensive operational experience in humanitarian and peacekeeping operations, with its global presence in the field, was able to provide a unique service. Normally, OPCW operations are conducted only during times of peace. Recall the situation several years ago in Libya, when the OPCW suspended verification operations while the civil conflict raged.

As we discovered with the investigation Mission, adequately training, preparing and equipping technical staff for the conditions on site was an absolutely critical necessity. Yet, when the unthinkable happens – as it did on the first visit to Ghouta when the investigation team’s convoy was fired upon by snipers – the presence of professional and experienced UN security staff was indispensable. An act of tremendous bravery, the investigation team was able to regroup, replace their disabled vehicle, negotiate a new route and they successfully accomplished their visit that day without any further incident.

### *Negotiating with multiple local factions*

That leads me to a second common challenge. The situation in Syria has been exacerbated by the fact that Government does not control much of its territory, including locations where chemical weapons were allegedly used or where chemical weapons facilities are located—indeed, there are about 1000 autonomous rebel factions operating in the country. For the investigation, to visit a single neighbourhood, we would have to negotiate and coordinate access with up to 40 different groups, moving from checkpoint to checkpoint.

To overcome these challenges, the Joint Mission has been able rely upon the already-established presence on the ground of the United Nations country team in Damascus as well as on other UN Missions operating in the area. The United Nations also has extensive experience in negotiating access for humanitarian convoys. Through information gained from its established local networks, the United Nations is able to build up reliable security risk assessments used for mission planning. During the investigation, we were able to go a step further and negotiate temporary ceasefires during the periods in which international staff would be on-site.

### *Overcoming mistrust*

Given the highly politicized environment surrounding the Syrian conflict, even neutral international organizations have to work hard to overcome significant mistrust regarding their intentions. This problem has been most acutely felt when we have attempted to negotiate the legal modalities necessary for the United Nations to operate in the country. In the case of the investigation, this process lasted for four months. For the Joint Mission, this process is still ongoing.

Often, it seems that the ability to reach a breakthrough on legal differences relates more to external events rather than to achieving common and mutually acceptable understandings. This reality has served to underscore the political dimension of the chemical weapons issue in the context of the current conflict. While this was a major impediment for the investigation, the disarmament mission has been able to immediately get on the ground due to the mandate afforded to the two organizations by the decisions of the OPCW Executive Council and the UN Security Council.

### *Ambitious deadlines*

A key challenge we have faced in approaching the process of eliminating Syria’s chemical weapons programme was the ambitious timeframe established under the Russian-US framework and endorsed by the Security Council and OPCW Executive Council. These timelines required inspectors to gain immediate to all relevant sites in the country to begin their work.

Ordinarily, the conduct and financing of all destruction activities is the sole responsibility of each possessor-State. In this case, the ambitious disarmament deadlines required the significant coordination of international support, to provide for funding, equipment and – most importantly – the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons at sea by third-party countries. This coordination was compounded by the fact that key Governments involved lacked the ability to engage directly with the Syrian Government through diplomatic channels. Again, here the two international organizations – through the Joint Mission – were able to make a unique and invaluable contribution by serving as the main interlocutor for the most pressing political, financial and logistical requirements.

## **Conclusions**

Given the circumstances, the joint approach has succeeded so far in doing everything possible to facilitate the elimination of Syria's chemical weapons. The distinct mandates and competencies of the two international organizations have been major assets and have contributed to a seamless operation.

With its dedicated inspectorate and 15 years of experience, the OPCW has rightfully served as the lead technical agency for the Joint Mission. The United Nations functioned as the operational enabler for the Mission, particularly in the provision of overall coordination and liaison with the Syrian Government and opposition groups, security arrangements, logistics, information assessments, communications and outreach, and administration.

What we have accomplished together over the past two months is not insignificant. As reflected in the most recent report of the Secretary-General: substantial material and equipment have generously been provided by the international community to assist Syria in meeting its obligations; A significant maritime presence has also been deployed in the eastern Mediterranean; These actions have been carried out at great expense, with impressive cooperation and considerable speed by the international community.

While the current operating environment will continue to pose a major challenge in the months ahead, the Joint Mission is continuing to do everything possible to achieve its mandate. As a closing note, I must emphasize that the ultimately responsibility for ensuring the complete elimination of the chemical weapons programmes rests exclusively with the Government of Syria.

Thank you very much for your attention.